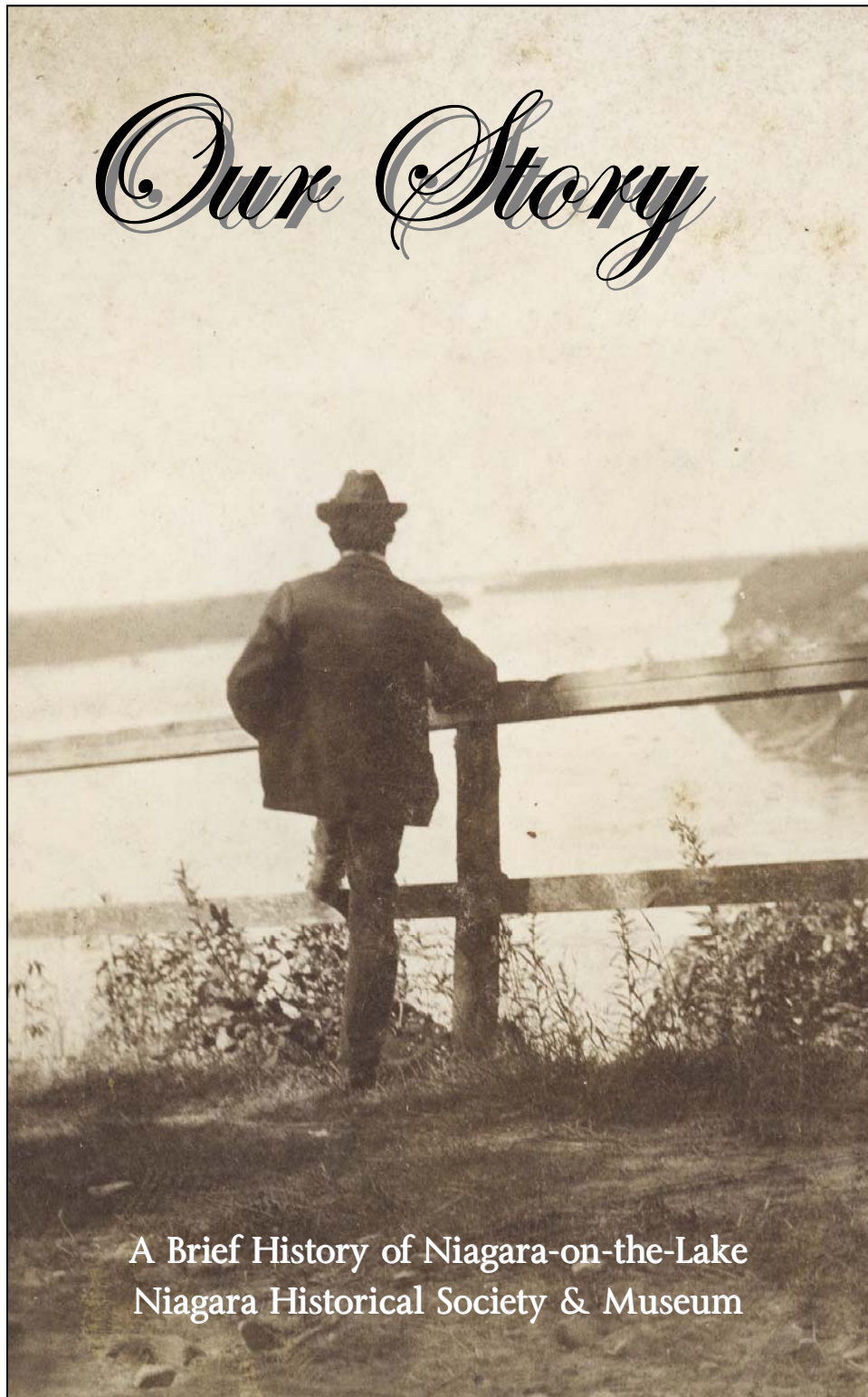


# *Our Story*



A Brief History of Niagara-on-the-Lake  
Niagara Historical Society & Museum

## OURSTORY

Since the retreat of glaciers over 10,000 years ago many different people called Niagara home. Settlement of refugees after the American Revolution created dramatic changes to the land. The town started out as the most important community in Ontario, and for decades remained an important legislative and judicial centre.

The people of Niagara have seen war ravage their homes, industries rise and fall, agricultural shifts, changes to transportation and many economic booms and busts. Many factors played a role in creating this unique community. Please follow us on our journey.

### Niagara's First People



Native People have inhabited Niagara for over 11,000 years, long before European explorers “discovered” the Americas in the 15th century. These earliest inhabitants were nomadic hunters and gatherers. Over time, Native settlements became more permanent as the cultivation of crops became an increasingly important food source. Around 1300 AD, distinctive nations emerged, including the Neutral Nation, which inhabited Niagara until they were overcome by the Iroquois around 1650.

Following the Neutral demise, Seneca and Mississauga settled briefly in the Niagara Region.



Examples of Native artefacts: Birdstone and Wampum. Photos by Andrea Field

### **The Neutral Iroquois**

Etienne Brulé was the first documented European to visit the Neutral, in 1615-16. Samuel de Champlain, who had sent Brulé, nicknamed the group “la nation neutre” in 1615. He so labelled the group because, in his words, “between the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) and our tribe (the Huron) they are at peace and remain neutral.” The name “Neutral” is misleading. While the group did not make war with the Huron or Iroquois, they did engage in conflicts with other groups. Hostile prisoners taken by the Neutral could expect varied forms of torture, inclusive of scalping and cannibalism. The Neutral nation occupied a large tract in Southern Ontario. The settlement nearest to Niagara-on-the-Lake was called “Onguiaahra.” Permanent Neutral settlements tended to be located in areas well suited to agriculture and people occupied small resource based camps on an as needed basis.

Indian corn, beans and squash were the most popular crops grown. The longhouse was the typical form of shelter in permanent settlements, and was often surrounded by palisades for protection.

The Neutral occupation of the Niagara area ended around 1650, when the nation was overcome and dispersed by the Five Nations Iroquois.

### **European Contact**

By the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Neutral Nation had some interaction with the Europeans. This late date of contact is due in part to the actions of nations like the Huron, who protected their monopoly over the lucrative European trade by keeping the French and English traders out of competitors' territories.

The Neutral, like other nations, became embroiled in a cycle of dependence on Europeans, namely for muskets. Alcohol and novelty items of European origin were also highly prized goods. This cycle proved devastating to the natives, nearly as deadly as the pathogens the Europeans unwittingly brought across the ocean and into the Americas. Smallpox, diphtheria, influenza, cholera and measles, among others, decimated native populations which had never been exposed and thus had no immunity to such diseases.

## The First Loyalists

The United Empire Loyalists were American colonists who adhered to the unity of the British Empire and joined the Royal Standard in American before the Treaty of Separation (1783). They were multiethnic, multiracial, of various social standing and religiously diverse.

They sacrificed their lives, homes, lands and goods to live apart from republican Americans believing that injustices should be worked out under the British system of government. Nearly 80,000 refugees fled to Québec, the Maritimes, England, the British Caribbean and Africa. Some 5,000 came to Niagara to pioneer again.

## **The Indian Department**

The Indian Department was a quasi-military organisation whose officers served directly with Native warriors in wartime, and were responsible for all treaty negotiations and other agreements in peace time. They were also responsible for promoting British colonial policy and for distributing the annual 'presents' which kept the Natives allied with Britain.

## **Butler's Rangers (1777-1784)**

John Butler was Deputy Superintendent of the Northern Indian (6 Nations) department at Fort Niagara from 1775. In 1777 he coordinated Old Smoke and Cornplanter's Seneca's with John Johnson's KRRNY militia and Joseph Brant's Native and white volunteers to battle rebels at Oriskany. Québec General-Governor Carleton commissioned Butler to form his own company of the 50 Loyalist provincial corps to fight alongside Native allies under British Army command.

The Rangers were people of Germanic, Dutch and British decent. The Rangers consisted of farmers, traders, soldiers and escapees from rebel prisons including slaves.

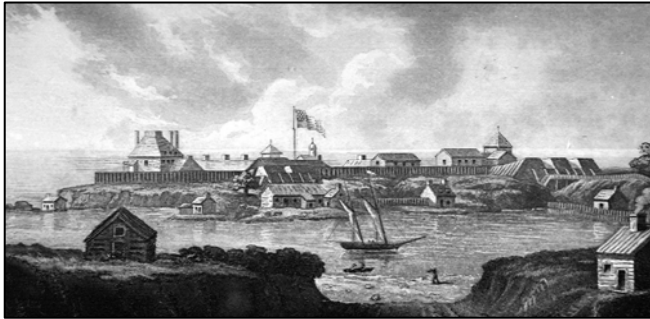
The Rangers grew, to 10 captained companies. Butler offered higher pay and tried to promote on merit not money. Gen. Haldimand wrote: "they should march well, shoot well, endure privation and fatigue and destroy the continental American Army's supplies."

The Rangers became most effective guerrilla militia in the Canadian Department during the Revolution.



## Fort Niagara

Under Col. Mason Bolton, Fort Niagara (located at the mouth of the Niagara River and originally established by the French to assist with the fur trade)



was inundated with Col. Butler's expanding Ranger companies, the Indian Department, Captain Joseph Brant's Native warriors (Mohawk, Onondaga, Cayuga and Seneca) and civilian refugees.

Extra food and supplies were needed for almost 5,000 people. Col. Butler then facilitated the revival of Sir William Johnson's 1764 Treaty with the Senecas ceding four miles on the east and west bank of the Niagara River. This allowed Butler to settle "some old Ranger families" who pioneered again and built cabins, planted their "Kings wheat, oats (and) Indian corn" by 1780. The Secords started to build a saw and grist mill and this was the beginnings of settlement in what is now Niagara-on-the-Lake.

## Settlement

The settlement of West Niagara was initially established to support the British War effort during the Revolution. Some of Butler's Rangers with farming experience were allowed to grow crops on the west side of the Niagara River to support the refugees and soldiers at Fort Niagara. As years proceeded, these first settlers lost their homes and livelihood in the new United States of America and started new lives in Niagara. They brought with them the skills and knowledge that most communities in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century would have. The Servos family established a King's Mills on Four Mile Creek near Lake Ontario. Their stores and operations would continue for many generations. Mills were set up along Four Mile Creek and established Upper Canada's first industrial corridor, providing many essential products for the early settlement of Niagara to survive and grow.

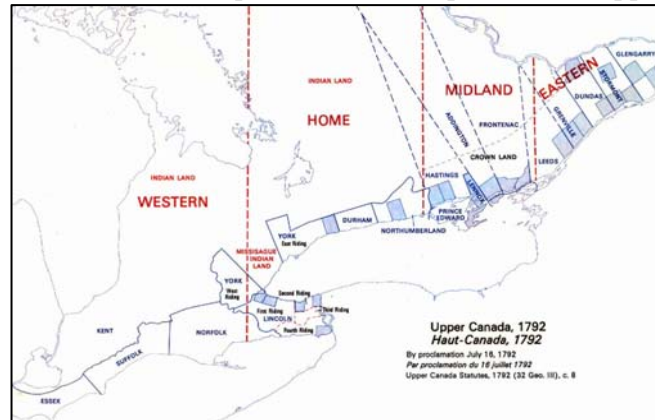
## The Capital Years 1792-1796

The creation of Upper Canada occurred on December 26<sup>th</sup> 1791. The British Parliament John Graves Simcoe the first Lieutenant Governor and Newark (now Niagara-on-the-Lake) became the capital. This laid the foundation for today's Ontario.

### **Why divide Canada into Upper and Lower Canada?**

At the time of the American Revolution, Niagara was part of the colony of Quebec. Quebec had retained French law, language and culture. All of this was unfamiliar to the Loyalists. These new arrivals had fought, suffered, given up home and treasure to retain their culture, their way of life; they were not about to give it up again.

In 1791, the Constitution Act passed in London, creating the two Canadas, Upper and Lower. These later became the provinces of Ontario and Quebec. This map shows the new province of Upper Canada in 1792.



Upper Canada refers to the geographical elevation of the province that is upstream (mostly of the St. Lawrence River, the main transportation route at the time) from Lower Canada.

### **Niagara in the 1790**

A few crude log cabins greeted Lt. Gov. Simcoe and his family in 1792. Mrs. Simcoe chose not to live in an unpleasant Navy Hall. The Simcoes preferred living under canvas, weather permitting. Yet four years later nearly one hundred well-constructed homes graced the capital. Nearly all were 1 ½ storey clapboard homes with brick chimneys and shingled roofs standing on a half-acre or more of land. In some cases the kitchen was the original home with other rooms added on later. The backyard would have a fruit and vegetable garden. Visitors found Newark to be a handsome town compared to others in Upper Canada.

### **Establishing Order in Upper Canada**

Many of those involved in the Parliament and in early commerce came from the Thirteen Colonies that are now the United States – mainly from New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio. When the American Revolution broke out, they chose to remain loyal to the Crown and Great Britain.

Originally, the Loyalists or their families, before crossing the Atlantic had come from Great Britain, the German states, Switzerland, nearly all other European countries and Africa. All shared a British-North American culture and ideals.

### **Accomplishments of the Parliament in Newark**

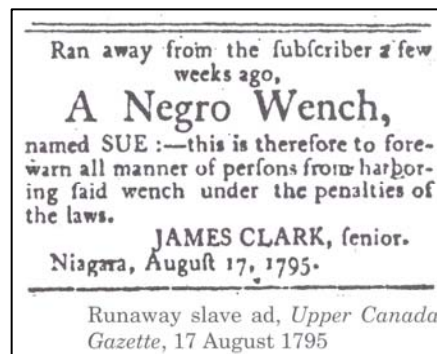
1. The Government would be modelled on that of Great Britain
2. All British statutes and court decisions would become law in Upper Canada in so far as applicable
3. All rights and liberties enjoyed in Great Britain would also be enjoyed by Upper Canadians
4. Upper Canadian society would be based on that of Great Britain – structure, ethics and ideals
5. Slavery would be phased out in Upper Canada before anywhere else in the British Empire or most of the United States
6. The Law Society of Upper Canada was born in Newark

### **A Mortal Wound to Slavery**

The issue of freedom was high on the agenda of the first sessions of Parliament. A summary of “an act to prevent the further introduction of slaves and to limit the terms of contracts for servitude with the province (passed 9 July 1793 – Chapter VII 33<sup>rd</sup> George III A.D. 1793 Second Session).

### **Slavery and Freedom**

1. No more slaves may be brought into Upper Canada
2. Slaves already in Upper Canada will remain slaves
3. The children of slaves will be freed upon reaching 25 years of age – accurate records will be kept regarding the birth date of such children
4. Children born to the children of slaves are free



## **Battlefield Niagara: The War of 1812-14**

On June 18, 1812, the United States declared war on Great Britain. For three years, Niagara was a war zone, the scene of American invasions and bloody battles. The fate of the future country of Canada hung in the balance but in the end Upper Canada was preserved.

On the eve of the War, the Niagara region was the strategic hub of southern Ontario, headquarters of the British Army and British Indian Department under the command of General Isaac Brock. For three years of War, Niagara would be the front line of battle.

### **Causes of the War of 1812-14**

The War of 1812 was part of a global conflict. Britain and her allies were in a death-struggle with the French under Napoleon Bonaparte, trying to prevent the French from dominating Europe and the far-flung European colonies throughout the world. Britain's army and navy were fully committed to stopping Napoleon's ambitions for a worldwide French empire when the United States declared war. Canada would be the battleground.

To prevent supplies from reaching Napoleon, the Royal Navy maintained a blockade of French ports and patrolled the high seas, stopping merchant vessels in international waters, including those of the neutral United States. Before 1812, more than 5000 sailors were seized from American ships and forced to serve in the Royal Navy. This threat to American sovereignty was one of the causes of the War of 1812.

Following the American Revolution, the settlements of the United States were pushed westward. The rights of Aboriginal peoples were ignored. Their land was seized by land speculators. Under leaders like Tecumseh, many of the Aboriginal people resisted. In the skirmishes and battles that



resulted, the Americans suspected the British of aiding the Aboriginal people. This perceived violation of American sovereignty was another cause of the War of 1812.

### **The Events**

When word of the declaration of war reached Niagara in late June, 1812, the British garrisons were put on immediate alert and the flank companies of the militia were called out for active duty. During the next three years, Niagara suffered three invasions and occupation by the enemy. Civilian casualties and hardships were severe.



### **Battle of Queenston Heights**

On October 13, 1812, an American army invaded at Queenston. Isaac Brock rushed his forces to meet the invaders and in the subsequent Battle of Queenston Heights the invaders were defeated by a combined force of British regulars, Upper Canadian militia and Six Nations warriors. The battle was won but General Brock was killed.



### **Battle of Fort George**

On May 27, 1813, the American army again invaded Niagara. Following a bombardment that destroyed Fort George two days earlier, an amphibious force of more than 5000 overwhelmed the 1000-man garrison of Niagara. British and Canadian casualties were heavy. The Americans captured the town of Niagara and remained as an occupying force for the next seven months.

### **Occupation of Niagara and St. Davids**

The Americans retreated from Niagara on December 10, 1813 after occupying the town for 7 months. They burned Niagara when they left. In July, 1814, an American army invaded again, this time attacking at Fort Erie. Defeating a British army at the Battle of Chippawa, they advanced towards Niagara, occupying the village of Queenston on the way. On July 18, 1814, an American foraging party came under musket fire near St. Davids. The village was burned in reprisal.

### **The Treaty of Ghent**

By the end of 1814, the American army that had been occupying Fort Erie since July, withdrew from Canadian soil. On Christmas Eve in Europe, the Treaty of Ghent was signed, ending the War. Upper Canada had been saved and would remain under the British crown. The people of the Town of Niagara began to rebuild on the ruins of the town. Many of those early post-war buildings survive to this day.

The War left a legacy that grew as the century progressed. Canadians were proud of their achievements in the war, sometimes forgetting that the British Army and Aboriginal allies were crucial to the defence of the province. The people of Upper Canada felt a kinship with the inhabitants of Lower Canada and the Maritime provinces. A feeling of national pride grew. Eventually the former colonies confederated into a new nation—the Dominion of Canada.

## Rebuilding Niagara

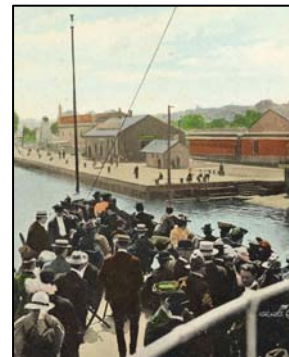
Word spread in early 1815 that the “War of 1812-14” ended. The men of Niagara returned from military duty and prisoner-of-war camps. They found their homes and businesses destroyed. Thus started the years of rebuilding. The founding of the Niagara Harbour and Dock Company in 1831 further enhanced the town’s prosperity. However, by 1860, the center of commerce as well as the county seat moved to St. Catharines through which the Welland Canal ran. Niagara, in a state of depression, turned its farms into fruit orchards.

### **Reconstruction**

At the close of the War of 1812-14, the town of Niagara lay in ruins. Officials made the decision to move the town further inland, away from the river and American territory on the opposite shore. The new Court House and Gaol were constructed well away from the pre-existing town centre and Butler’s Barracks and the Indian Council House were built on the commons. However, for the most part, rebuilding of homes and stores occurred on their former sites. The two churches remained in their previous locations, St. Mark’s repairing a heavily damaged structure and St. Andrew’s totally rebuilding. Niagara once again was a stop in the flow of raw materials headed east and goods and immigrants headed west. By 1830, Niagara was thriving. Lives and buildings were rebuilt.

### **Niagara: A Shipping Centre**

The rebuilding of the Town after 1814 saw plans to establish a wharf and a sheltered port and to dredge the marsh which bordered the river downstream from Navy Hall. The founding of the Niagara Dock Company in 1831 marked the growth of the Town into a commercial, manufacturing and transportation hub. Even though the completion of the Welland Canal in 1833 eventually overshadowed Niagara as the principal shipping route to Lake Erie, the Town’s connection to the water continued to be its greatest strength and the source of its name, Niagara-on-the-Lake. The Town’s easy proximity to Toronto by water, the fertile fruitlands in the surrounding area, the arrival of railways linking Niagara to the Falls and to Buffalo and the establishment of a military presence at Camp Niagara all meant that ships would carry passengers and freight to and from Niagara until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



## The Railways and Electric Trams of Niagara

The need for efficient transportation over the Niagara Escarpment to Lake Erie and beyond led to the construction of a rail line from Queenston to Chippawa above the Falls on the Niagara River in 1839. These first rails replaced the old portage road with horse drawn carriages which met Toronto or Buffalo bound steamers at each end of the route. Seasonal limitations led to its demise but in 1854 Samuel Zimmerman revived the railway using steam locomotives and extended the line as far as the



Niagara Dock. The Niagara Mail enthusiastically observed that "Niagara will not remain set down in a corner by herself but will soon be in the thick of railway progress." Extension of the line to Fort Erie and Buffalo in 1863 with connections at Niagara Falls for New

York, Albany and Boston made Niagara a major transit point for international travellers. By the end of the century local electric trams linked St. Catharines, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Queenston, Lewiston and Niagara Falls in a network used by locals and tourists alike.

## Niagara as Refuge

Niagara served as a place of refuge for various political and social groups in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Joining blacks that had either been born free or freed by their masters were those who escaped from slavery in the United States by following the Underground Railroad. There were 104 blacks in town in 1861. Most of them lived in the "coloured village" south of William Street. At the end of the Civil War, Confederate officials, seeking safety after the conflict, arrived in Niagara. Prominent among them were Senator James Mason and Generals William Breckenridge and Jubal Early. Former President Jefferson Davis visited in 1867.

As a consequence of the social reform movement, Niagara became the first Canadian stop for many poor or orphaned girls from Britain. In 1869, Miss Maria Rye purchased the second Court House and turned it into "Our Western Home", where the girls were trained in domestic skills before being placed with families.

## Coming of Age

By the early 1870s, Niagara-on-the-Lake had experienced a number of economic setbacks, with the removal of the county seat, Dock Company, and military garrison in the 1860s. However, its residents found other ways of sustaining Niagara. Tourism and the commemoration of Niagara's past became important features of the town.

### **Tourism in Niagara**



Tourists in Niagara tended to come from wealthy backgrounds and often were Americans from the Buffalo area, upstate New York or as far as the southern states. Many came with their families for the entire summer and returned year after year, staying in hotels such as the

Queen's Royal or buying property in Niagara.

### **Recreation in Niagara**

Summer tourists and Niagara residents enjoyed a range of leisure activities, such as boating and swimming, as well as sports such as golfing, tennis, lawn bowling and cycling. The summer tourists also made the social scene quite lively, with gatherings in their homes and at the Queen's Royal Hotel.

## The 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Thousands of soldiers trained on the Fort George Military Reserve before going overseas during World War I and World War II. Camp Niagara was a focal point of the town during this era. The Camp ceased operations following the Korean War and Niagara needed to find a new direction. For some time Niagara-on-the-Lake was in steady decline. Today, Niagara-on-the-Lake is known for its built heritage, wineries and the Shaw Festival theatre. The community is thriving, with expansion within its urban boundaries and prosperity in its rural areas.



### **The Shaw Festival**

In 1962, those living in Niagara-on-the-Lake knew that it was a special place. The problem was, the rest of the world did not. Few tourists visited and the heritage properties were under threat to decay. In that year a group of people were at a dinner party and discussed this problem. A suggestion came forward to try and operate a theatre. One of those present, a lawyer named Brian Doherty, exclaimed, "Shaw!"

Mr. Doherty had a deep passion for theatre. Before World War II he had written several plays with some success. While serving in the Royal Canadian Air Force during WWII, he made many connections in British theatre circles.

He started producing plays and organized touring companies for many of those actors he befriended during the war.

It was this experience that enabled him to chair, produce and be the artistic director for "A Salute to Shaw", a two play, eight-performance, all volunteer production at the Court House in the summer of 1962. This was a turning point for the community. The following year, the committee decided that this should become a professional festival.

Actors were hired, Andrew Allen was paid to be the first artistic director and the performances ran for 3 weeks.

By 1964 sales were booming, people were coming back to Niagara-on-the-Lake and critics were in attendance. In 1968 ticket sales were at 100% in the 389-seat theatre. The next step was a purpose-built theatre. Mr. Doherty was instrumental in procuring funds for the construction of the 857-seat Festival Theatre, which opened in 1972.

Today, the Shaw Festival has a staff of over 400 people at peak times, with ticket sales exceeding 300,000.

### **Agriculture in Niagara**

Early travellers to Niagara note many varieties of wild and cultivated tender fruit. Improved transportation led to the rise of Niagara's tender fruit as a commodity. By 1858 the Niagara Fruit Growing Association was founded. In the following decades, more farms grew all varieties of tender fruit. Greaves Jams started in the 1920s, thrived through the depression and are still in business today. Today farms are producing grapes for wine production and many tender fruits such as pears, peaches and cherries.

## About the Niagara Historical Society & Museum

In December 1895, in answer to a notice in the local paper, 15 persons met in the public library room at the Courthouse and the Niagara Historical Society was formed. The objectives of the Society were to encourage the study of Canadian History and literature, to collect and preserve Canadian historical records and relics, and to build Canadian loyalty and patriotism.

Under the determined and devoted leadership of Janet Carnochan, sufficient funds were gathered to build Memorial Hall. Dedicated to the memory of the United Empire Loyalists, the hall opened on June 4, 1907, making it the first building in Ontario designed solely for use as an Historical Museum.

The Museum outgrew the space of Memorial Hall and expanded into the old high school after WWII, and the link building connecting the two areas was completed in 1973.

The Museum now contains over 40,000 artifacts and archives.

The **High School** portion of the Museum contains part of the permanent display "Our Story", our Gift Shop and the Research Centre. The **Link** building includes the remaining components of "Our Story".

The **lower floor of Memorial Hall** is our temporary exhibition space. The Museum presents 2 to 3 temporary exhibitions every year to explore the various aspects of Niagara's history as well as its place in the world.

The **second floor of Memorial Hall** contains the Janet Carnochan Gallery. This space also displays temporary exhibitions. Many



artefacts do not fit our permanent or temporary exhibition space, but are great examples of Niagara's history. This gallery is rotated to showcase the many wonderful artefacts in the museum collection.

## Joining the Society



Membership to the Society is available at a reasonable price. Your membership fees assist with the care of the collection and the continuing education of the public of the significance of Niagara-on-the-Lake. Members receive free admission to the museum, our quarterly newsletter, advance notification of events, a 10% discount in the gift shop and more. For information about joining the museum please ask at the front desk or call us at 905-468-3912.

## Visiting the Museum

The Museum interprets one of Canada's most important historical communities. There are many stories to explore. Depending on your level of knowledge or interest you can discover new histories in many ways. If you come back to the Museum, just read the "Our People" component, or just the main text, or alternatively, just the artefact text. We have attempted to provide a worthwhile experience for both novice and expert historians

## Funding

The Niagara Historical Museum is owned and operated by the Niagara Historical Society. The care and preservation of the collection would not be possible without the continued support of the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake and the many donors who keep the doors open to the public. The Society is always looking for funds to further enhance the work carried out by the Society and the Museum and for individuals who would like to volunteer their time.

## Niagara Historical Society & Museum Activities

The Society offers a wide variety of events and lectures. Check out our website for the most recent listings. We are also happy to conduct group tours of the wonderful town of Niagara-on-the-Lake. Please visit [www.niagarahistorical.museum](http://www.niagarahistorical.museum).

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**\$0.50**

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